

Notes

Where is She? Representation of Women in History

Rukhsana Ali*

Some months ago the media reported the public flogging of a young woman by the male members of the village. It was not only an item in the print news, or a just a mention on TV news channels, but the latter, time and again played and replayed the actual video clip of the happening. The entire nation, if not the entire world, viewed it. Though we had heard and still do hear about such incidents, to actually see it happening live was very painful, and it stayed with us, and I am sure that now as I mention it, the video clip must have started replaying in many of our minds. It was horrific and unpalatable. Many of us, at that time must have thought that finally, here is real live proof of the crime, and there is no way anyone can ignore it and that, justice will be done. But was it? We all know that, in a day or two, the young woman and her family gave a statement that nothing of the sort had happened and that the video was false. While the newscaster was relaying this statement, the video clip was once again replayed. What was happening? An undeniable proof of the crime was being denied, and was being erased from history. This young woman and many like her will not feature in the history that will or is being written now. She and the others will simply not exist for posterity and such heinous crimes will and do continue. Of course there are some brave individuals like Mukhtaran mai who want to be heard, recorded and documented, and are willing to take the risk, so as to help and encourage other women who had suffered as she had, to come forward and help bring the culprits to justice, so that this unhappy and unpleasant aspect of our society and system is recorded in history and thus could be dealt with. But such individual are few and far between. In general, women who become victims of such crimes as Mukhtaran mai was or of the 'justice' meted out to the young woman in the video clip, do not come forward for fear of the consequences that not

* Ms. Rukhsana Ali is Coordinator in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Aga Khan University Medical College, Karachi.

only they but their families may have to bear. As such they are lost to history. Why?

The answer to this why is given by Nawal al-Saadawi in a published paper read in a conference in Beirut. She writes,

...history has never been, nor can it be, a neutral science, a totally objective science that exposes the complete truth. Many of the true facts concerning the lives and struggles of the masses over the years have been buried, or erased, or distorted, or misinterpreted to serve the aims of particular forces in society.¹

This is not unusual or mystifying, as the historian writing the history is doing so from his own point of view, and in order to serve specific purposes or interests. In general therefore, history has tended to express the viewpoints and interests of the dominant forces or classes in society, and as such it has a tendency to change from era to era, or be rewritten whenever a new political force comes on the scene.² Although this may happen, one thing has remained constant, and that is, that, histories written were either political, diplomatic or military histories where only men feature, and in these there was very little room for women. Dr. Mubarak Ali, in his book *Tarikh aur Aurat*, eloquently says that for a long time it was an accepted viewpoint that it is only men who make history and if there had been no great or noble men, there would have been no history.³ It is only recently that new approaches and perspective in history writing are being adopted, and comparatively, even now, very little work is done on any other kind of history.

As Gerda Lerner, the pioneer of women's history, states that, the striking fact about historiography of women is the general neglect of the subject by historians. As long as historians held to the traditional view that *only* the transmission and exercise of power were worthy of their interest, women were of necessity ignored,⁴ they were the largest group who were for the longest time, outside the power structure and thus out of history.

This neglect of women in history is not very surprising, given the fact that as until very recently, scholars, mainly men, have studied the world from the male point of view, and women have often been seen

¹ Nawal al-Saadawi, *Arab women and Politics* in (London: Zed Books 1997), p.245

² *Ibid.*,

³ Dr. Mubarak Ali, *Tarikh aur Aurat* (Lahore: Fiction House, 1993), p.6.

⁴ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), reprinted in 2005.

only as they appear to men. This has often meant that women do not appear as human beings at all, but ‘as objects, symbols, appendages to someone else’s enterprise, as problematic others to be assigned a neat place’.⁵ Dr. Mubarak Ali in his above-mentioned book gives instances after instances of how women were, and I would add are still being used as man’s property. In our context, to be used as and when the man needs to make a deal or transaction, as we see in the tradition of *watta satta*, to keep property or wealth in his control through sisters’ or daughters’ marriage with the Holy Quran, to recompense for a death / murder by him or other male member of the family by getting the daughter or sister married to the victim’s relative irrespective of age or the girl’s wishes, to quench his anger when a female member exercises her God-given right to decide to marry of her own choice through *karo kari*, or when he desires sexual pleasure by visiting the prostitutes, and then all these women are promptly forgotten or discarded once the end is achieved or pleasure is satisfied, because as the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in his book *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex) asserts that women had no history, that they were invariably ‘the other’, not ‘subjects’. These and such atrocities are not particular to our part of the world, they have also been happening in the western, the so-called developed world, under other guises. We all are aware of the huge market of child prostitution in the Far East which is flourishing due to its western clients.

In religions too matters are not too different. Here where women have been ‘elevated as goddesses, virgins, mothers, symbols of purity, mercy and love, they have also been denounced and degraded as whores, witches, seducers, symbols of treachery, malice and lust’.⁶ And it is the latter image that has often been reinforced rather than the former. One finds examples in every major religion of religious traditions which treat women as second class ‘citizens’. For example, in early Jewish tradition women were considered evil and the man who had daughters was to be pitied.⁷

In such a scenario, it is no surprise that women do not feature in history. One may retort that there *are* women in history: what about Cleopatra, Catherine the Great, Razia Sultana, the Rani of Jhansi, and

⁵ Nancy A. Falk & Rita M. Gross (eds.), ‘Introduction,’ *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures* (San Francisco; Harper and Row, 1970), p.xiii.

⁶ Denise L. Carmody, *Women and World Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p.17.

⁷ Denise L. Carmody, ‘Judaism,’ pp.193, 198.

even Phoolan Devi the Bandit Queen, to name a few? Of course there are histories written about such women, which Lerner calls, the history of 'notable women'. The history of notable women is the history of exceptional, even 'deviant' women, women who took on what is considered 'a man's job', in a man's world, dealing with and leading men, which of course is quite unnatural for women. This may be why they were considered worthy to be recorded in history – doing what a man does. But this history of notables does not tell us much about those activities in which most women engaged, nor does it tell us about the significance of women's activities to society as a whole. It does not describe the experience and history of the mass of women. Women of different classes have different historical experiences which should be taken into account.

Again, there are those women who were not in 'power' as the above mentioned ladies yet they do feature in history, for example, Mumtaz Mahal, Gulbadan Begum – Emperor Humayun's sister, Zaibunnissa – Emperor Aurangzeb's daughter. But though Gulbadan was a writer – probably one of the earliest historians – who wrote her memoir to enshrine, once again the life and times of her male relatives, and Zaibunnissa a *sufi* poet of high standard in her own right, nonetheless, all of them, including Mumtaz Mahal, were of the royal household. Could there not have been other poetesses among the masses, other 'historians' among the masses? Where are their histories?

Society has created paradoxes in formulating its values for women. The rationale for women's peculiar position in society has always been that their function as mothers is essential to the survival of the group, and that home is the nucleus of society as we know it. Yet the mothers, the housewives and homemakers have throughout history, been deprived of the *one* tangible reward our society ranks highest – an income of their own. Neither custom, law, nor changes of technology, education or politics have touched this sacred tradition.

Initially when women went out to work, it was just an extension of their domestic and traditional roles – teaching, i.e. looking after the children; nursing, i.e. looking after the sick and the aged – the tasks they did in their homes. And these professions, inspite of efforts of various agencies, are still considered as mainly suitable for women and have as yet not attained the social or financial status of any of the 'men-oriented' jobs/ professions. Lerner goes to the extent to say that, when women have entered an occupation in large numbers, this occupation has come to be regarded as low status and has been rewarded by low pay. She lists teaching and nursing as two such occupations, to which I may add in our context, factory work, cottage industry, house-helps. Lerner further adds

that such discrimination is not only limited to unskilled labour, but is also present in intellectual and creative work. She says that creative fields in which women excel, that is poetry and short stories, have been those carrying the lowest reward in money and esteem.

Women have contributed in many various ways to the society and individuals, but their true contribution is often lost. For example, Margaret Sanger who is merely seen as the founder of the birth control movement, not as, in words of Lerner, 'a woman raising a revolutionary challenge to the centuries-old practice by which the bodies and lives are dominated and ruled by man-made laws'. In the labour movement the women are described as 'also there' when they did more than just be there. In hospitals, those merely nurses, are the ones who are almost 24 hours a day with the patient, doing more than just giving medicines and checking the vital signs of the patient. More often than not, they are the tower of strength for the dying patient or a grieving parent. Have we ever considered *them* as part of our history? I recently heard that in Britain the women survivors of Second World War, had now stood up and were demanding to be noticed. They claimed, and very rightly so, that during the war, it was they who kept the home country running – doing all that they already did and in addition to that, had taken on the work of the menfolk as well. While the men fought at the front, the women worked and maintained the country. They farmed, ran the machines in the factories to keep production going, etc., in addition to looking after their homes and families. But ever since the war ended, from time to time, on various fora, it has always been the war veterans who were acknowledged, honoured and medalled. The real veterans, the real warriors were the women whose hard labour inside and outside their homes, made it possible for the soldiers to have a home and country to return to. Why have they not featured in history? Why did they have to ASK to be recognised?

As Mary Beard a feminist, states, 'what is important is not that the women were an oppressed group, but that they have made a continuous and impressive contribution to society throughout all of history. It is a contribution, however, which does not fit in the value system generally accepted by historians (mainly men) when they make decisions as to who is or is not important to history. 'Contribution history' is an important stage in the creation of a true history of women, but it must be of their ongoing functions in the male-defined world, *on their own terms*. This is important because the limitation of such a work is that it deals with women in male-defined society and tries to fit them into the categories and value systems which consider man the measure of significance.

So how does one judge whether a woman's contribution is worthy enough to be part of history? Are women noteworthy when their achievements fall exactly in a category of achievement set up for men? Obviously not, for this is how they have been kept out of history books up to now. Are women noteworthy then as early feminists? Not likely. The fact remains that women are different from men and that their role in society and history is different from that of men. Different but *equal in importance*. Obviously, then, their achievements must also be measured on a different scale. To define and devise such a scale is difficult until the gaps in our historical knowledge about actual contributions of women have filled. This work remains to be done.

Nowadays more and more work is being done on women's history, where history is recorded as experienced by women and not as what men think women experienced or how they felt women should experience. And such historians are also realising the irrelevance of the periodisation of history as normally done, when basic changes in society occurred. As these were mainly political or military histories, and as women were never a part of either, their periodisation has no meaning for them. However, the decisions taken during a political or military phase has impacted women, as individuals and as groups, and we need to make that part of our history. A country or state has women as part of its citizens, in fact very often in a far larger number than men, and to completely leave out such a big part of yourself out of history, is ridiculing history. If we start towards writing a social history of our country rather than a political history, many of the issues mentioned here would be dealt with. Again, in words of al-Saadawi, 'attempt to reread history and to view the historical movement as an interaction of economic, social, political and cultural factors, in which the various component groups and classes engage in a struggle that is the dynamic force of change'⁸ may be an approach we could think about.

Although a lot more can be said, I will conclude by saying that roles women played at different times in our history have been changing. The patterns and significance of these changes await study and new interpretation. One would hope at once for a wider framework and a narrower focus – a discarding of old categories and a painstaking search of known sources for unknown meanings. It is an endeavour that should enlist the best of talents of the profession and at long last, not primarily female talent.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.246.